

**Thomas D. Watkins**

**Responses to  
Questions Requested by the State Board of Education**

**1. Why are you interested in Michigan?**

Michigan is my home. During my twenty-five years in Michigan I built a strong network of diverse friendships, relationships and colleagues. I would welcome the opportunity to return home to build upon this foundation of contacts in government, politics, business, human services, healthcare, nonprofits, media, labor, K-12 public education and higher education to benefit children and enhance public education in Michigan.

**2. What is your specific interest/commitment in shaping Michigan's educational system for the future?**

I have the ability, energy and enthusiasm as well as the passion to work with diverse constituencies to develop cutting edge initiatives and reforms in education. Additionally, I have two very specific reasons for wanting to have a leadership role in shaping Michigan's educational system. My son, Daniel, age 15 and my daughter, Katherine, age 12 both attend Michigan public schools. Beyond these reasons I believe our system of public education is the symbolic "Statue of Liberty" of hope and opportunity for all of our children. I want to help ensure that all of Michigan's children obtain the education they need and deserve. Not all of Michigan parents can afford to live in the affluent areas of our State yet all children deserve the opportunity to experience a world class education. Even in top districts support and encouragement to improve is necessary.

When I served as Michigan's Mental Health Director (1986-1990) my measuring stick for our standard of care was one question, "If a member of my family was ill would I want them cared for at a public hospital?" My vision for all Michigan schools is to make them centers of excellence. I want all of Michigan's schools to be so good that I would be proud to send my children there.

The State that creates a public education system that leaves no child behind will be the State that drives the economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If Michigan is to be that State all of us must be invested in helping to transform more of our schools from being traditionally driven to being more knowledge driven. Michigan put the world on wheels because innovators took the leap into the future rather than clinging to the past. The potential exists to create a public education system that is as progressive and beneficial as the automobile was to the horse and buggy industry it replaced. Simply stated, the key to our future is a high quality, world class educational system that serves all of our children. I want to help make that future our reality.

**3. What impact do you think you can have on the position? What would be your priorities?**

My broad base of experience in higher education, business, politics, government, human services and pre K-12 school reform uniquely position me to galvanize diverse constituencies around creating a world class school system that will serve all of our children. My eclectic background and strong network of contacts across various sectors coupled with my knowledge of Michigan and its legislative process are strong assets that enable me to partner with key leadership constituencies. I

will strive to build bridges among those different groups so that together we may build on the foundation of the best of our public education system and challenge all of Michigan's citizens to change what is not working in the best interest of our children.

Immediate priorities include:

- Develop a working relationship with each member of the State Board of Education
- Strive to create a vibrant, cohesive team that optimizes the unique personalities, skills, talents, experiences and perspectives of each member and is dedicated to and focused on teaching and learning
- Visits to schools across the State to listen to local educators in their classrooms and in a town meeting type of forum. I will integrate their thoughts and reflections regarding what each of us in the education system may do from our unique perspective to enhance the quality of public education into action plans
- Gain a greater understanding of existing Board Policies and ensure adherence during the transition period
- Reach out and listen to constituencies including teachers and the unions representing them, the Executive Office, the Legislature, Department of Education staff, other departments within State Government, state and private colleges and universities - especially those with teacher preparation programs, school administrators, disability community, charter school staff and local school boards, business entities and others. These listening opportunities will help build the foundation that will facilitate working together for the common good of all students.
- Forge alliances and dialogue with the supporters of the failed voucher initiative to identify ways we can work together to improve public education
- Build on knowledge gained to begin process of reassessing and developing the strategic priorities for year 2001 and beyond
- Identify and implement a well thought out reform initiative to demonstrate early that we plan to alter the course of business as usual and lead change
- Consider convening a statewide shared vision and common agenda education conference to highlight past successes as the foundation for creating a world class public education system. Leaders from education, business, labor, government, the faith communities, senior citizens and media could use this forum to develop a plan with strategies that will unite Michigan around high quality public education for all of our children.
- Establish an Education Technology Task force comprised of K-12 educators, technology experts, business leaders and representatives from higher education to develop a plan to make our teachers, parents and students the most technologically advanced citizens of the world. The keys to our future are sitting in our public schools today.

Additional thoughts regarding policies and programs to make our learning system the best in the world are included in my response to Question 9.

**4. What is your background and experience in the improvement of student knowledge and achievement— especially in low-income or low-achieving districts?**

One of the great strengths I bring to this position is that am not a traditional career educator. I am not encumbered with the organizational malaise known as "we have always done it this way", "we don't do it that way" or "we tried that and it did not work." I am not saddled by tradition or constrained by the past. I bring the inquisitiveness of a child and the wisdom of a grandfather gained from my eclectic career path, my experiences and my educational background. I look forward to

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melding my knowledge and practical learnings with the experience and knowledge of traditional educators as I have successfully done in the past.

I had the lead role in establishing Michigan's first charter school, The University Public School, at Wayne State University. Over 60% of the 330 students randomly selected from an applicant pool of 6,000 qualified for the free and reduced price federal lunch program. Additionally, I have consulted with a number of the early, start up urban charter schools in Michigan as well as in other states. As Special Assistant (to David Adamany, President of Wayne State University) for Public School Initiatives I created partnerships with business, healthcare, mental health, human services and other community organizations to benefit students. Specifically we leveraged community mental health resources to provide three mental health counselors at the school, obtained volunteer doctors and nurses from Children's Hospital and applied for and received over a half million-dollar grant to infuse technology into the school. These services greatly augmented the education dollars we received from the State.

I bring a history of success and leadership in a number of diverse settings that includes creating and implementing major changes in paradigms. I have demonstrated throughout my career that I am able to marshal resources both within and outside of my direct control and motivate and persuade others to join forces to help accomplish mutually established goals. It is this background and history of success that I would like to mesh with the knowledge of career educators to help improve teaching and learning for all of Michigan's children.

**5. What is your knowledge or experience with standards-based accountability (or other tools) for improved student achievement?**

The State Board of Education should approach standards-based accountability from a governance perspective. In other words, high academic goals for all districts, schools and children should be set. The resources to reach these demanding standards should be provided. However, the Board must not be overly prescriptive on how to reach these goals. The implementation plan for using the tools made available at the State level must be developed at the local level in recognition of their autonomy and need to respond to the challenges unique to their situations. In short, the State Board of Education should set high standards, provide resources and tools to accomplish these high standards and allow the districts the freedom to reach the goals while holding them accountable for doing so.

We should heed the psychological truth that what is watched, monitored and evaluated does tend to have priority focus and emphasis within an organization. Setting high standards and holding all within the system accountable for reaching these standards has merits as well as limitations. Research has shown that simplistic standards and a sanctions approach to school reform alone do not equate to greater student learning that is sustainable in the long run. Does this mean we retreat from setting standards and testing students to ascertain results? Of course not, it does suggest that school reform is as complex as the human beings that carry out the reforms.

Hence, a number of strategies must be engaged to produce meaningful, sustainable results that are accepted and incorporated by the parties responsible for implementation including teachers, administrators and local school boards and the like. Just telling local districts and the teachers they employ to "work harder" will not ultimately produce the result we all seek, that is higher academic achievement for all students.

Linda Darling-Hammond, author of The Right to Learn, said it best when she addressed one of the sessions of my Superintendent Prepared Program sponsored by the Institute for Educational Leadership. She points out that if new standards are to result in greater student learning, rather than greater levels of failure, our accountability policies need to:

- Ensure that teachers and other educators have the knowledge and skills they need to teach effectively to the new standards
- Help schools evaluate and re-shape their practices
- Put safeguards in place for students who attend failing schools.

According to the Education Commission for the States the little research that has been about Standards also suggests that:

- Standards have the potential to be an engine for change and improvement but only if states re-design other system components – curriculum, assessment, accountability, teacher education and professional development and resource allocation – around them
- States that have focused on aligning various components of their education system with standards have shown improvement in student achievement and school quality.

It is *our* responsibility not only to set high standards but also to provide districts with the appropriate tools to reach those standards. Working with the Board and other key leaders, I will strive to approach the subject of standards with an inclusive perspective. I will be vigilant in ensuring that our strategic measures are synergistic, cohesive and aligned one with the other and are focused on the ultimate goal of creating optimal learning opportunities for all Michigan students.

**6. How do you view the role and relationship of the Superintendent and Board? What, if any, experience do you have dealing with a board of directors?**

Throughout my professional life I have had the opportunity to both serve on boards of directors and interact with boards as the paid executive leader. My most recent experience is my current role as the Executive Director of the Economic Council of Palm Beach County. I report to a board comprised of the Chief Executive Officers and Presidents of many of Palm Beach County's largest businesses.

In this role I am required to use analytical skills and to build relationships with diverse professional, non-profit, educational, public and private enterprises to anticipate and respond to issues impacting the quality of life of the people of Palm Beach County. This enables the Board to actively implement action plans as well as to be a leading catalyst for change regarding issues of importance to Palm Beach communities. My position requires a keen awareness of when to lead, when to listen and when to gently re-direct discussions and actions in a judicious and savvy manner. Ultimately, it is my role working in concert with the Board to ensure that decisions are consistent with our mission, defensible by research, data and experiential learning, and are made with consideration of the "big picture".

I believe that it is imperative that the Board of Education and the Superintendent have a strong base of mutual respect, listen intently to each other and actively debate policy issues with the best interest of Michigan's students at heart. Once a policy or direction is established it is critical that everyone own and move toward implementation as if they originated the idea – with the Superintendent leading the way.

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I concur with Anne Bryant, Executive Director of the National School Boards Association, and Paul Houston, Executive Director of the American Association of School Administrators, when they said, "Strong school board/superintendent leadership, governance and teamwork are the foundation for raising the achievement of every child in America." We will work as an effective, unified, collaborative team with clarity of purpose to educate all Michigan students to high standards.

My record includes success in working with diverse groups of people and boards of directors. One of my strongest suits is the ability to build consensus among different individuals and groups of constituents to work toward mutual goals. As a leader, I may create productive tension to purposefully enhance meaningful dialogue and decision making. I strongly believe that the best decisions are ones that engage all points of view in the debate. I am very participatory in my management style, decisive by nature and determined to ensure that decisions are implemented effectively.

**7. What do you mean by "education reform"?**

Quite simply education reform means finding out what barriers stand in the way of effective teaching and learning and then seeking solutions that will remove those barriers. We must keep in mind that education reform is a journey that is never completed. At the State and Local levels we must strive to become learning organizations that continuously integrate knowledge from research, parents, teachers and students. Education reform must always be focused on our core mission, teaching and learning. We also need to do more than just become more efficient at what we are currently doing as a public school system. We must determine if we are even doing the right things.

As we all know, there are no silver bullets for reforming our system of public education. It would be silly as well as ineffective to devise a "one-size fits all" or as Henry Ford said, "You can have any color car you want as long as it's black", approach to reforming Michigan schools. It should be the policy of the Board of Education and the Superintendent to provide equitable, reasonable reform tools to every school district. That gives each local entity the autonomy to enhance and improve their schools according to their own needs. The State should set high academic standards and provide reasonable resources and hold all districts accountable for reaching those standards. The results (improved academic achievement) should be prescriptive – the methods to achieve education reform should not be.

I have been involved in a number of education reform efforts including serving on the Board of Palm Beach County, Florida's Annenberg Challenge, World Class Schools, Grades 0 – 5 school readiness initiatives, workforce development, creating charter schools, developing an Education Commission for Palm Beach County and creating after school programs through the National Service Learning Organization, Earthforce. I am most proud that this past November the organization that I lead as Executive Director took the initiative to help Children Services Council, a county-wide children's organization with taxing authority, pass a ½ mill tax increase dedicated to school readiness/pre-school and after school programs. The business community realized that you do not build a strong house from the roof down – you start from a strong foundation and then build up. This philosophy convinced conservative CEOs and Presidents of Palm Beach County's largest employers to support a tax increase targeted at investing in children. All of these efforts added value to overall student learning. Each initiative taught me anew that school reform is a daunting

undertaking and not for the faint of heart. It is exceedingly difficult work – but the rewards of children learning and growing are well worth the effort.

**8. Describe your vision for improving educational outcomes.**

I envision a day in Michigan's future where excuses for failing our children are eliminated and to a person we are dedicated to educating *all* of our children to world class standards. As a State and a Nation we are slowly coming to grips with the fact that we cannot spare one child. In the fast paced global economy gone are the days where a student could drop out of school, head to the factory and expect to emerge as a member of the middle class. For example, basic computer literacy is necessary for gainful employment even in a minimum wage, fast food establishment. A strong mind and the ability to learn and re-learn is required of all if all of our children and our State are to prosper. If we are to succeed enlightened leadership is what is required. We need to stop the reactions of denial, blame, scapegoating and protectionism that come from the education establishment as well as those outside of it.

The State Board of Education and its Superintendent of Public Instruction must use its pulpit to bring divergent groups and views together to focus like a laser on improving teaching, learning and educational outcomes for all children. The question is not whether change will occur in public education. The question that remains is whether the State Board and its Superintendent are willing to set the pace and lead sound change that enhances the democratic principles of public education and helps our teachers teach and our children learn.

We must ask ourselves if we want to remain stagnant, passive and reactionary or if we want to form alliances with our historical friends and foes alike to create a common agenda that places our children's needs to be educated to world class standards above all else. I envision the State Department of Education in partnership with business, higher education, labor, media, the faith communities, foundations, fraternities, sororities, senior citizens, human service and non profit organizations to become the movement (not the establishment) in education reform with a focus on positive educational outcomes for all our children. I have the ability and proven track record in a variety of settings to help lead the State Board of Education in this direction.

**9. Specifically, what are the policies and programs you would advance in Michigan to make our learning system the best in the nation?**

First, if I may be so bold may I suggest that the premise of your question is wrong? Our goal will not be to be the best in the "nation", but to be the best in the "world". The children of Michigan are not and will not in the future compete against just the children of America. They will compete against the children of the world. To say we are better than some other State in light of the global economy would be akin to saying you are the smartest kid in the dumbest class. It is a dubious honor at best. Building on my initial priorities articulated in my response to Question 3, I would advance the following program and focus to make Michigan's system of public education the best in the world.

The Department of Education working along with other key constituencies will focus on:

- Creating a sense of urgency and determination that engages Michigan citizens to improve *all* of our public schools
- Implementation of high academic standards and equally high accountability for all
- Expanding quality public school choice throughout Michigan

- Reduction of class sizes especially in the lower grade levels
- Enhancing reading programs especially in low income or low achieving districts
- Marshaling active assistance for underachieving schools
- Creating safe and orderly school environments
- Recruitment and retention of the best and brightest teachers
- Propose and implement an initiative aimed at cultivating new leadership paradigms at the superintendent and principal levels. Potential participants would be sought from within and outside of the public education system. Leadership matters and is required if we are to build on past success and also revolutionize public education to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
- Provision of professional development opportunities for educators that are directly tied to quality student outcomes
- Support and development of early childhood school readiness and before and after school programs
- Assure that every student in the K-12 school system has the skills and knowledge necessary to continue lifelong learning and is able to make a successful transition into the workforce
- Capitalizing on creative and innovative uses of technology
- Create a practical model of melding school to work. For example, propose a public-private partnership with Compuware in downtown Detroit that includes a technical high school as part to their Campus Martius development.

The world is changing rapidly and public education needs to catch up. Not only is change constant but its pace is accelerating. There are no longer stable solutions, only momentary improvements. In today's face paced world, change is the only constant and knowledge and imagination are the fuel that will drive productive change. We need to lead the charge to ensure that school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers and the public at large are ready to manage this change.

Our public education system helped build this great country. If we want to thrive and not merely survive we must have the creative capacity to continuously remake ourselves to meet the needs of a changing society. Public education can not lead us in the future with its eyes firmly affixed to the rear view mirror. We are capable of leading the necessary changes. This will require taking calculated risks to benefit all students. We must be mindful of our history and also be cognizant that we will not get to the future by staying firmly rooted in the past. Michigan's children deserve our bold, thoughtful, creative efforts and above all our willingness to put their needs above all else. The thoughts I have shared will guide me as I propose policies and programs that will advance our efforts to make our learning system the best in the world.

**10. How would you close the achievement gaps where they are most severe?**

I believe that unequal problems require unequal responses. No, this does not mean automatically throwing more public money at schools and districts that have yet to close the achievement gaps where they are most severe. It does mean working with local districts to determine (as discussed in the response to Question 3) what barriers are hampering improving achievement gaps and seeking ways to remove these barriers.

After careful analysis with local districts responses may include:

- Talking with teachers, administrators, parents and students to seek their advice and to build ownership that is critical to sustained change
- Targeting Federal and State grants to the local districts
- Working with local districts to secure foundation grants
- Making sure with the assistance of the local school districts, law enforcement and social service organizations that children are attending school. Time on task does matter and adults cannot expect children to learn if they do not attend school.
- Instituting with the local school districts parent development programs that provide tools to assist parents in supporting emotional and academic development
- Seeking support from business, community colleges and state and private colleges and universities that includes financial and managerial consultation, employees acting as tutor and mentors and donations of equipment
- Providing technical assistance to the district
- Support and development of early childhood, school readiness and before and after school programs
- Targeting reading resources to ensure that all children are at least reading at grade level
- Providing incentives for master teachers to teach and mentor at underachieving schools

Only after all efforts to provide training resources and support are exhausted and children are still not receiving the education they need and deserve should the State take action to directly intervene in the local school district's business. The State should however make all efforts to provide support and assistance to help local districts improve underachieving schools. In the end we have a moral if not a legal obligation to intervene directly if that is what is required. To do anything less would be tantamount to institutionalizing child abuse from my perspective. While there are some obvious school districts where achievement gaps are more severe even the top districts need encouragement and support. They too, need to be challenged to enhance the quality of the education they offer to their students.

**11. How would you turn around failing schools?**

I believe the answer to Question 10 responds to this question as well.

In closing, you have stated in your position description brochure that you are seeking a leader with a demonstrated record of innovation, motivating staff, effectively managing financial resources and budgets, assembling needed resources, building consensus, dealing with diversity, communicating effectively and know when to lead, when to facilitate and when to mediate with good judgment and political savvy. My record of achievement in diverse settings from government/politics and human services to business and school reform clearly demonstrates that I have the capacity and desire to lead major change initiatives. I would be honored to work with you to continue and expand the leadership legacy of The Michigan State Board of Education. I look forward to talking with you to further demonstrate why I am uniquely qualified to be Michigan's next Superintendent of Public Instruction. Thank you for your consideration.